

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today condemned the violence targeting Shia Muslims in Iraq at the start of the religious festival Ashura. In five attacks today, at least 19 people were killed and more than 100 injured.

“The government of Iraq must do more to protect its religious communities, including its majority Muslim Shia community,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “This festival was discouraged by Saddam Hussein, but it has become even more dangerous for the pilgrims under the new Iraqi government.”

Shia Muslims are a majority in Iraq, but a minority in the world wide Muslim community, where Sunnis are the majority. The violence this week is being blamed on al-Qeada in Iraq, a Sunni Muslim extremist organization. Bombs were detonated in Karbala, Sadr City, Hillah, and Babel.

More than a dozen bombs have exploded across Iraq in the last 24 hours, mostly targeting Shia Muslims as they begin their Ashura celebrations. Also, there have been several attacks targeting Iraq's Christian minority, as they begin their Christmas festivities and worship. On December 23, USCIRF issued a press release condemning the terrorist attacks on Christians in Iraq.

The Shia festival of Ashura commemorates the death of Imam Hussein in 680 AD. More than 1.5 million pilgrims are expected to make the trip to Karbala, one of Shia Islam's most holy shrines. The festivals have been plagued by similar bombings and attacks on Shia Muslims in recent years.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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